

# Sweeney Ridge

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
  
Golden Gate  
National Recreation Area



Artist's conception of the Portolá expedition's first sighting of San Francisco Bay from Sweeney Ridge in 1769.

## In Their Footsteps

Sweeney Ridge bears the footprints of explorers, soldiers and citizen activists, as well as an occasional elusive mountain lion. All who have visited Sweeney Ridge over time have shaped its history and left their mark. As you follow their footsteps, we hope you discover what drew people to this magnificent place and why this land was important to them.

## Discovery and Disappointment



Map of Father Pedro Font, 1777

Have you ever been lost, only to discover something unexpected? Spanish explorer Captain Juan Gaspar de Portolá, on a mission to settle Monterey, found himself in that position atop Sweeney Ridge on November 4, 1769. Relying on a sailor's exaggerated description, Portolá didn't recognize Monterey even as he stood upon its sands, so he continued northward. Lost and ailing, his expedition eventually scaled what we now call Sweeney Ridge and saw "...a large arm of the sea...some sort of harbor there within the mountains." Ironically, it had taken a land expedition to

find what seafaring explorers never discovered--the San Francisco Bay. Though Portolá had become the first European to see the bay, he realized he had missed Monterey, and so wrote of his historic day simply: "We traveled for three hours, the entire road was bad, we halted without water." Despite Portolá's initial disappointment, the Spanish soon recognized the value of the region. By 1776 they had established the Presidio of San Francisco, which protected the Bay Area for the next two centuries under the Spanish, Mexican and American flags.

## Fear Factor

All of us have felt fear at some time. During the 1950s, Cold War-era fears of Soviet long-range "Bear" bombers caused the U.S. Army to develop a weapon to destroy those planes. Nike anti-aircraft missiles were deployed across the country, including 11 sites protecting the Bay Area. Nike Site SF-51 included a control station atop Sweeney Ridge and a missile launching site at nearby Milagra Ridge. By the 1960s, nuclear capable Nike Hercules missiles stood guard on this ridgetop. Obsolete by 1974, SF-51 was abandoned under the provisions of an arms-reduction treaty.



Soldiers guard Nike missiles. (U.S. Army photo)

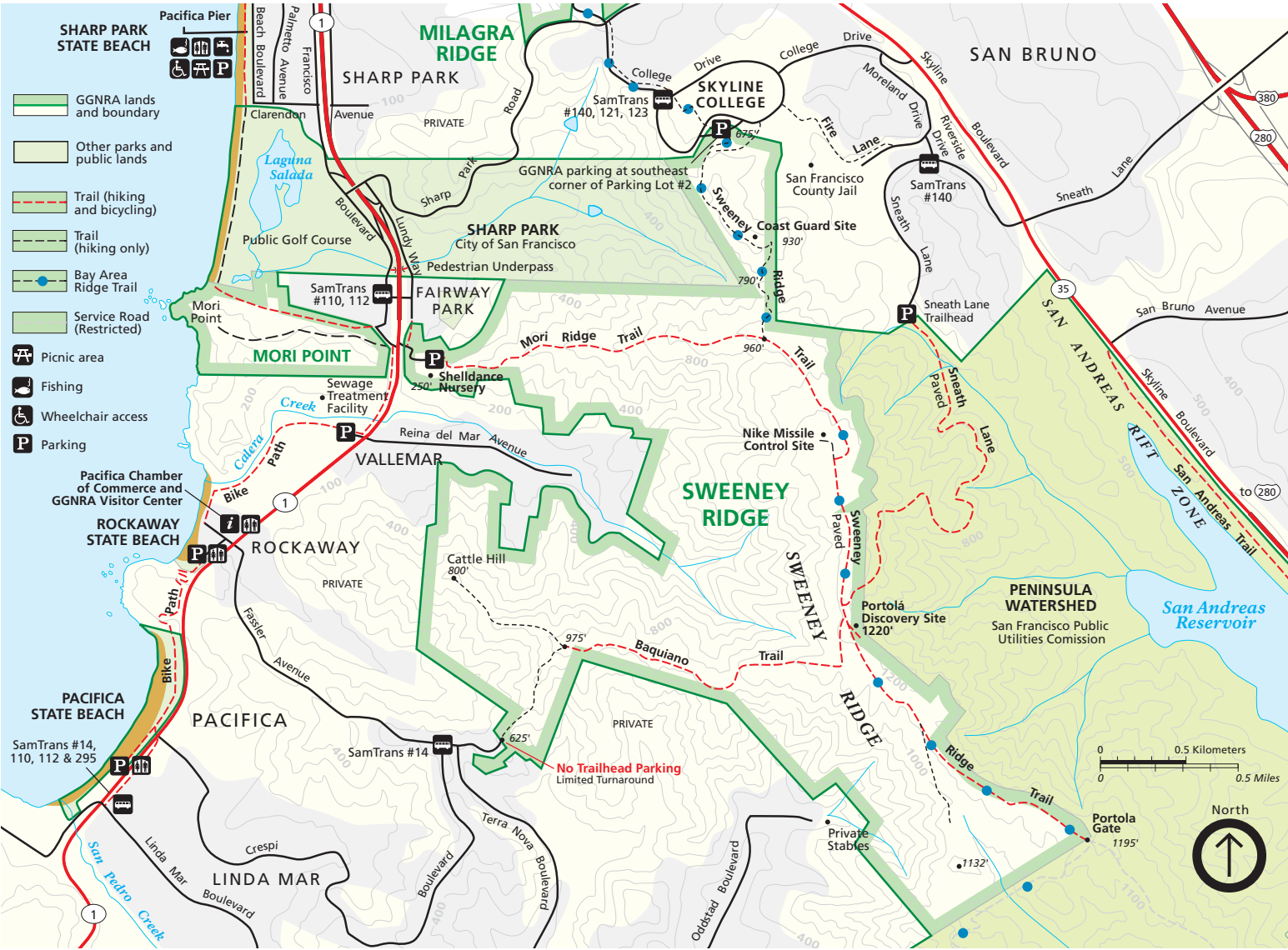
## Protecting the Ridge



In the 1970s and 80s, local citizens recognized new threats to Sweeney Ridge in the housing developments sprawling up nearby hillsides and a proposed 8-lane freeway extension bisecting the ridge. Community activists organized, signed petitions and voted to protect this

1200-acre ridgetop. Many of these same citizen activists now volunteer to improve wildlife habitat, maintain trails and lead walks.





Ranging on the Ridge



California Academy of Sciences  
*Mountain lions find refuge on Sweeney Ridge*

Like their human counterparts, wildlife explore and defend territories. Here on Sweeney Ridge the web of life is remarkably intact: mountain lions, coyotes and bobcats range in search of rabbits, mice, voles and shrews, which in turn search for food and water sources of their own. And all these creatures find protection in Sweeney Ridge's native

coastal scrub vegetation. This entire ecosystem is protected by the National Park Service. Today, volunteers protect habitat here against invasive, non-native plants that threaten this delicate ecological balance by displacing the native plants on which wildlife depend.

About Your Visit

Please continue the protection of Sweeney Ridge by staying on designated trails and picking up litter. Mountain bikes are allowed on fire roads, but not on single-track trails. Dogs on leash are allowed. Fires, camping, and off-road

vehicles are not permitted. Finally, protect yourself: though Spring and Fall offer the best weather, wear layered clothing year round as temperatures can change rapidly. Bring sunscreen and water.

Finding Your Way

From Pacifica, Sweeney Ridge trailheads are located at Sheldance Nursery off of Highway 1, and at the east end of Fassler Avenue. From San Bruno, trails from the west end of Sneath Lane off of Hwy 35 (Skyline Blvd), or from Skyline College out of Parking Lot #2 lead to Sweeney Ridge.

For More Information

Pacifica Visitor Center  
650-355-4122  
[www.pacificachamber.com](http://www.pacificachamber.com)

Presidio Visitor Center  
415-561-4323  
[www.nps.gov/goga](http://www.nps.gov/goga)

Site Stewardship Program  
415-561-3034, ext. 3437  
[www.parksconservancy.org](http://www.parksconservancy.org)

